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Annie: Hi friends, welcome to another episode of That Sounds Fun. I'm your host Annie F. Downs. I'm really happy to be here with you today, we have such a great show in store. But before we dive into this conversation, I want to take a quick minute to tell you about one of our amazing partners, CAP. Y'all know I love Christian Appalachian Project, it means so much to me. We talked about them out on the road on that That Sounds Fun Tour, you hear me talk about them a lot here. They have been with us for a long time, we are with them, I just love the work that CAP does.

And now they are actively making the world a better place especially for our neighbors living in Appalachia. For nearly 60 years, CAP has been serving the people of Appalachia by building hope, transforming lives, and sharing Christ love. Their dedicated staff and volunteers ensure that families have the food on their table and the roof over their head that they need. And in times of heart-breaking and life-altering disaster, they help others put the pieces of their lives back together.

CAP gives unconditional love and brings hope to children, and families, and seniors, who would otherwise be marginalized or forgotten. And now that you're friends with CAP too, I want to invite you to be a part of these incredible stories, by making a donation that's meaningful to you, or signing up to go volunteer, to learn more, visit christianapp.org. Together we can help make a brighter tomorrow possible for our neighbors in Appalachia. Again that's christianapp.org.

All right you guys today on the show, I am so excited about this episode. Roger Bennett is a broadcaster, a podcaster, a filmmaker, who has through, Men in Blazers, which some of you may know, become one of the most prominent soccer broadcasters in the United States. Along with Devo, y'all know Michael Davies, Men in Blazers has turned a weekly Premier League Podcast into a popular television show on NBCSN covering a lot of sports, including women's soccer, golf NHL, but soccer is their conversation.

His new book, *(Re)born in the USA: An Englishman's Love Letter to His Chosen Home*, is a funny and moving memoir. Where he really traces how he fell in love with America, growing up in Liverpool. It's really interesting to hear from the perspective of someone born in another country, who chose to move to the U.S. about his thoughts on what America at its best can be. So here is my conversation with host of Men in Blazers, and my new friend who I just think so highly of Roger Bennett.

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I read the book because I wanted to, I ordered it myself, but also I watched you and John Green, and you said, "I can tell the difference, when an interviewer has read the book, and when they haven't." And I was like, "Oh, Rog is going to know. He's going to know I read the book. "

Roger: That's so cute, and so funny. You are amazing. He's a fantastic human being, John Green, he really is, he's life changing.

Annie: Yeah, one of the reasons I, I'm an Arsenal fan, is that okay? Can we talk about that for a minute?

Roger: We can do whatever you want.

Annie: Listen, Rog, what am I going to do, what's happening with Arsenal? It feels like we're spiraling, and I love our new manager, but it still feels like we're spiraling.

Roger: You're a person of faith.

Annie: I am. I just have to keep believing?

Roger: What do we really know? What other choice do we have? What other choice do we have, but to keep believing?

Annie: I listen, I don't trust Arsenal like I trust the Lord, it's not the same.

Roger: You know, it's all, there's a lot of human darkness, and so the reality is Arsenal, is just a reflection of the outside world. And you just got to keep grinding away through times good and bad, and is the reality.

Annie: You model that well with your Everton love, of like, good days and bad days you just are all in.

Roger: I think, I've been an Everton fan, I've been a Chicago Bears fan, being a fan of so many teams that for whom winning is a fleeting emotion. I think is the greatest way to prepare yourself for the rigors of life, where is filled with challenge, and those challenges define you. And when you have occasional moments of joy, fleeting moments of joy, just celebrate them, don't take them for granted, and dance like you're at your own kid's wedding.

Annie: Yeah, I mean, I feel like that's one of the gifts that sports offers us in general. I mean, when I'm cheering for sport, Rog, is when I can be full Annie, and go all in.

And it like releases something in me, is that is that a normal thing? Is that a feeling you have too?

Roger: Yeah, I love going full Annie, and going all in, that's what I'm **[Inaudible 00:04:38]** that's like the whole thing. I mean, sport is many things, it allows you to feel deep emotions in the safest possible way, no matter what happens in whatever sport. At the end of the day, you can feel elation, you can feel devastation. But either way you still have, you're still alive, you're still intact, you emerge from it as you went into it. And it's the safest way to feel all of these emotions, and ultimately to feel alive, which really means to go full Annie, all in. Is this the podcast Annie, are we in it?

Annie: This is it, yeah, we are going.

Roger: Really? I think I love it, I love it.

Annie: Is this okay?

Roger: No I was like waiting for the introduction-

Annie: I'm so sorry. I just, we just-

Roger: ...but we don't need introduction, this is a post-introduction podcast.

Annie: ...I'm so sorry, Rog I thought-

Roger: I love it, I love it, amazing, I'm in it, go full Annie.

Annie: Yeah, this is full Annie, you're getting her because I'm thrilled to chat, yes, we are going. My thoughts when it comes to soccer in the U.S., it feels like a slow-moving train. I played growing up so soccer has been in my life my whole life, but MLS was a slow uptake, especially in the south. Nashville just got, we just moved to MLS this year, which has been a ball. Why haven't you even been down here for a game yet Rog?

Roger: Something called COVID, and the pandemic-

Annie: All right. Fair.

Roger: ...has kept me in pretty much, I have not left this studio, the confines of this studio in about 17 or 18 months, so well-

Annie: But still.

Roger: Worry not, believe me I would be down there in a heartbeat, and my lord, I would, to have a CA, World Cup Qualifier in Nashville.

Annie: I know I can't wait.

Roger: It will be a great day for your city, a great day for America.

Annie: Will you explain that to everyone, because this show is going to come out before that. Would you explain to our Nashville friends listening, and anybody who can get here for that U.S/Canada game. What does it matter that there's a World Cup Qualifier in Nashville for us?

Roger: I mean, football has in USA, as you've said, a slow build, the story of my life, and my deep, two deep loves are the love of America and the love of football, and I moved to America to fulfill a childhood dream. That's the dream I wrote my entire book about, the idea of America, the promise of America, the wonder of America. And I did move here in 1993, right before the World Cup was here in 1994.

And the World Cup was meant to make this, the last massive nation that had not fallen under football sway. Was meant to overnight sensation it, and make it like the pogo stick, or the hula hoop, or the Rubik's cube, and we joke on our podcast, Men in Blazers, that soccer, America's sport of the future as it has been since 1972. It's always about to happen-

Annie: It's about to be.

Roger: ...but the reality is

Annie: Yes.

Roger: While soccer was about to happen, it has happened. Our women are back-to-back world champions. And if our men get to be about half as good as our women, which they almost are now. This is the golden era in which we're living, then great things can occur.

And the popularity of the sport instead of being this overnight success, I mean, it's been a slow and steady build while I've been here, I want to be clear, not because of me, I'm just a tiny surfer riding a massive wave of many, many factors. **[Inaudible 00:07:49]** this sport that was derided when the World Cup was awarded to America in 1994, I mean it was awarded here in the late '80s.

Congressman Jack Kemp, himself a former NFL quarterback, famously took to

the floor of Congress and said, "I think it's very important that," I'm paraphrasing, but only a little bit. He said, "That we make a distinction for America's youth, the football is where you pass it and rush with the ball, and not kick it only with your feet. Because one is truly American and democratic, and the other is European and socialist."

I mean, that was how far, when I arrived here football was not just not interesting to Americans, they hated it, and that has slowly been whittled away. World Cup after World Cup, the popularity is growing, it's the perfect sport for the internet age, in the same way as the NFL took over from baseball as television. It was a perfect televisual sport, baseball really thrived in the golden era of radio.

So football, soccer has thrived in the internet era, where you Annie can follow your team Arsenal as deeply and with as much passion, as someone who lived in the same zip code as their stadium, and follow the intrigue, the gossip, the rumors, the injuries, the ins, the outs. So when I moved to America, in 1993, before the internet, I used to have my dad hold the phone to the radio in England, that I'd have to call him to follow along with games.

Annie: Oh, wow.

Roger: But that has completely changed, and now as we sit here Annie, America has become a proper football nation. World Cup football is coming to Nashville with this qualifier, and Nashville is just, I mean, it's a joyous footballing culture which will rise up, and embrace the U.S. team, and hopefully watch them on to victory.

Annie: That's wild, that you would call your dad because in your book *(Re)born in The USA*, you wrote about how you would call the U.S., will you tell that story about how you and your best friend would just call Chicago phone numbers to hear about the Bears, that story made me laugh, Rog.

Roger: I mean, I grew up in Liverpool in the 1980s, and Liverpool is a magnificent city, but in the 1980s it was a fairly dark place. The whole North of England was post-industrial, the mines had shut, the steel mills, the cotton mills, and Liverpool, this great port city, really had no meaning anymore in this post-industrial Britain. And unemployment soared, there was a heroin epidemic, there was real hopelessness took grip everywhere.

And if you've watched Billy Elliot, then you kind of get the picture. But I didn't ballet dance, instead, I inhaled everything American. America saved me, it gave me a sense, by watching Fantasy Island, Heart to Heart, Miami Vice, Run-D.M.C, Tracy Chapman, I learned to look at America as a source of inspiration, a source of joy, a source of human wonder. Where life could be lived with feeling, with

meaning, in glorious technicolor, whereas I was living or doomed to live in black and white.

And so when the NFL crashed onto English shores, and a very cold I should say, it was not a popular sport. We watched football and English football was still a backwater then, it was muddy soccer. It was played on muddy fields by sad men who lived to kick each other, and a hooligan culture, where you really went to the game to get into a fight with other fans. So I saw this NFL thing on television, just New Orleans Saints fans, their team [**Inaudible 00:11:12**]. And I was like, "You're losing every game go and beat up the Atlanta Falcons fans, that's what you're meant to do."

And instead, they pulled on paper bags over their heads, and just said, "We are the New Orleans fans." And they made a joke out of it, and kept having the time of their lives. And I realized sport could be about something more than winning, it could be about joy, and community bonding, and making memories across generations. So I was fascinated by this sport, I loved it, it was only on for an hour every Sunday. And it wasn't even that weekend's games, this is pre-internet, so the NFL gave us the weekend before games, edited into a highlight package-

Annie: Oh just a highlight reel.

Roger: Yeah, mostly it's Bonnie Tyler's, "Holding Out for a Hero". And so once I realized what I was watching was actually a week old, I could not stand to think, I was in love with the Chicago Bears, they were on the Super Bowl Tier that season. And I could not stand to think of Walter Payton rushing with the ball, without me knowing what the heck was going on in real time.

And so I decided to go to my best friend's house, because I couldn't do this at home, my dad would kill me. And we would go to his bedroom, and we did this week in, week out, and we would just, during Bears games, we would call random strangers, 312 numbers that's the Chicago area code, and the phone would ring. At which in its own way was so giddy to hear that American dial tone.

And then someone would answer inevitably, and they'd be like, "Hello." And we'd be like, "Hello, how are the Bears doing?" And got to love Chicagoans, the kindness of strangers, they would give us personal commentary sometimes for like 45, 50 minutes. Were like, "Walter Payton's got the ball, he's at 20, he's at..." And that's how we would follow along, with the kindness of strangers briefing us play-to-play down the telephone to two English strangers, America.

Annie: I just love that, I mean, the kindness of strangers is a little bit of a theme of your book. It feels like you keep running into people, and you do this too Rog, I watch

through Men in Blazers, and through your work, and you're doing it for me. I mean, we were strangers before this, and you're coming on my show, it's a kindness to me. How does that play out in your life? Can you see it as well as I can see it through reading your book, that the kindness of strangers has been a theme in your life?

Roger: Well, let me say, I mean, I did arrive in America with knowing nobody, and having no family here. And I mean, it's kindness of strangers and being passionate about something, and people feeling that passion, and reciprocating it's been a journey. The one thing that really stands out for me, is I was obsessed of America. I lived believing I was an American trapped in an English boy's body. One slight problem, I had never been to America, and I'd actually never met an American my own age.

We met two wonderful, weird New Jersey people once, when we were driving around the north of France, and the mother was about 70, she had this incredible hair color that I've never seen before or since, it was like purple. I was like, "Oh my God, that's a..." I remember thinking as a kid, I was like 11, "Is that natural?" I asked my mother. She, my mom was like, "I don't know, I've never seen that before, it must be American." And the dad had this inexhaustible supply of IZOD or Lacoste shirts in different colors, to which I said "Oh my god, so fresh, so clean."

And, so, I'd never met an American my own age. And then bizarrely, there just happened to be one in the park, I hung out in the park in the summer, every day. And just in one day it happened to be Chicagoan there, a cousin of a distant friend of mine. And it was just like, genuinely, it was like as if God had sent down tablets from the heaven and provided them to me. One day, I didn't know any Americans the next and American from the very city that I obsessed about, who came from a suburb where John Hughes had made movies.

Annie: Yeah,

Roger: You know he was there. And I was like, "I have so many bloody questions, first of all, Reebok pumps sneakers do they really make you a better basketball player?" I just unloaded every single question. "Do cool, menthol cool cigarettes really make your breath amazing." I had like thousands of questions from just watching American movies, getting Rolling Stone, every album I'd ever heard from. And this gentleman, incredible gentleman, Jeff Owen, then wrote to me every week for an entire year, and then at the end of the year, he wrote to me and said, "When you come to Chicago, when you come spend the summer here on the northern suburbs at the beach." And honestly, it was as far, I'd hardly been on the plane at that point in my life. It was as if someone had said, "Would you like to take a rocket to

Venus or Mars?"

And, jeez, Annie, it's the kindness of that, that trip changed my life. That trip made the notion William "Refrigerator" Perry in my imagination, who I met, the great Chicago Bear, but in my imagination told 15-year-old Rog to move to America. I think he was just trying to get away from me, and just drop platitudes and clichés, like, "Hey kid, dream big dreams kid, I did you can too." But at every step of the way, it's either people reaching out to me or me projecting that they were giving me the life-changing wisdom, that's led to me being on Annie Downs podcast.

[00:16:16] <Music>

Annie: Hey friends, just interrupting this conversation real quick to share with you about another one of our incredible partners, Liquid IV. Y'all know how much I love a tank top and a hike at Radnor Lake, and they are both good for my soul. But you better believe that I'm not heading out on one of these hot summer afternoons, without being well-hydrated.

Listen, one stick of Liquid IV in my water bottle, hydrates faster and more efficiently than water alone and they have some really fun summer flavors like watermelon, and strawberry, and lemon, and lime. They're so good y'all around the office, you know we are about having our Liquid IV every day just as part of a proactively staying hydrated, and knowing that's a huge part of our overall health.

I'm usually a morning Liquid IV girl, and I'm very partial to the Acai berry flavor, though strawberry, guava, and passion fruit, get a lot of love from the team as well. Liquid IV contains five essential vitamins, more vitamin C than an orange, less sugar than an apple, and as much potassium as a banana, and made with clean ingredients. Which means it's healthier than sugary sports drinks. What makes Liquid IV so effective is their cellular transport technology, isn't that cool? It's just a fancy way of saying that it has like optimal ratio of glucose, and sodium, and potassium, to deliver water and nutrients into your bloodstream.

And I love that they love to give back, they've donated over 11 million sticks to people around the world. So grab your Liquid IV in bulk nationwide at Costco, or you can get 25% off when you go to liquidiv.com and use the code, THATSOUNDSFUN at checkout. That's 25% off anything you order when you get better hydration today, using the promo code THATSOUNDSFUN at liquidiv.com. And now back to my conversation with Rog.

[00:17:55] <Music>

What did you do the morning you woke up and the book wasn't just like out in the world, it was the number one New York Times bestseller.

Roger: I am a person, Annie, and I think you probably know this from listening to my podcast, joy is a rare emotion in my life. So I found that it has hit that position, on the New York Times bestseller list, almost the very second an England striker named Harry Kane had scored a goal, that put poor England, hapless England, self-sabotaging England into the final of a major tournament for the first time since 1966. The second the ball went in my phone blew up, and I thought it was just people being excited for England, who actually to be candid, I don't support, I'm all American now.

Annie: Aha.

Roger: But I looked down on my phone, thinking it was just people being like, "Ay England, England, England." And instead it was like everyone in publishing, they're like, "Holy crap." And so to be honest with you, the dominant emotion, and I don't know how many of your listeners feel this when they have a moment of wonder, human wonder in their life, I honestly felt then, and I've only felt since.

Number one to write a book about America, which I have, the idea of America is the central idea around which I've organized my life. It's a beautiful idea, it's given me courage, joy, meaning, super complicated idea. Also, especially as I get older, as a kid it was a very deep, passionate kid's love that I actually acted upon, and made the central idea of my life and I wanted to write a love letter to America.

And when you do that and bring it out into the world, you don't know how, books are hard to bring to, it's like yesterday's technology. It's like people are not, books, lots of books come out and they're never opened. So I felt humbled, I felt deeply humbled by the response, I have felt the ongoing response has been incredible. And it's deeply humbling to me as a new American, to have Americans find deep meaning and joy in my American story.

And then number two, I felt no joy, I only felt relief, I felt immense, immense... To write a book is a deep sacrifice, your family sacrifice, they lose you, they lose you to the book. I wrote this book in a fever dream during COVID, when the beloved city of my New York City, shut down. And was overwhelmed at the beginning of lockdown, and there was panic, and fear, and chaos, and deep, deep and human uncertainty, profound uncertainty. And when the present was filled with challenge and sports stopped, I retreated into my past to happier memories, that I think is a very natural impulse. And I wrote the book in four months and hardly ever went outside, it was like a fever dream of writing. And so it was a big sacrifice, my

family, my kids, my beautiful wife, and so I felt a deep relief that what they had given me, which was a space to undertake this mad task of writing my love letter to America that it was all worth it.

Annie: I hope other authors have told you this, but as a fellow author, I will tell you, it's not only a huge deal, you hit number one, it's a huge deal you hit number one, not on release week. Because what that actually, I'm sure someone has told you this, but I just want to be your friend and tell you again, what that means is so many people have liked it that they keep telling other people to buy it.

And so I think that should make you feel some wonder, that it wasn't just your superfans, week one. It was your superfans reading it and then telling their friends this is a really good book. And it is a really good book Rog.

Roger: I feel very, very blessed in every way, because to bring a book out about America, and have America love that book is probably the most humbling thing I've done as a grown up adult professionally.

Annie: I grew up across the street from my grandparents, much like you did right there. Will, you talk, a lot of our friends listening, they're raising kids, they are having the opportunity to have their kids near their own parents sometimes if it's healthy and good, it was great for me. Will you talk a little bit about how much it meant to you to grow up near your grandparents?

Roger: With pleasure, thank you for that question, Annie. Because one of the joys, there's been so many joys of bringing this book out into the world. The one I detailed, just America loving my American story. Number two, just the embrace of American indie bookstores by our fans, they've really, they went out, American indie bookstores need our help more than ever. American indie bookstores are so much more than bookstores, they are centers of community, they pump out creativity and ideas, into the towns and cities that surround them.

And we asked our listeners to please if they're going to buy the book, which they did. By the way, pre-ordering a book from someone you know is the greatest human kindness. I'm only saying that because I benefited from it, and I want to say that it's changed my, I mean, it's a crazy thing to do, to buy a book, a month before you can even receive it. But my Lord, for any author, it matters massively. And they went to indie bookstores, and it's a beautiful thing to do, all hail indie bookstores.

And then the third thing is to honor the memory, and bring back to life almost in honoring the memory of several people who are so dear to me, there's a mentor, that teacher I had that-

Annie: Oh, we are going to talk about it.

Roger: ... was so deeply inspiring.

Annie: Yes.

Roger: Who saved my life, and I will get to him, so I'm going to share that. But to my grandfather, who I was so close to. Annie, your question was big picture, so grandpa Sam, I will say he's right behind me right there on my set at all times, with his war medals. And I named my son Samson, so it's close enough, but he could be his own person, and different. But the connection, all I can say is many of the people I am friendly with in my life, it turns out just serendipitously, but it's not serendipity, they were very close to their grandparents.

And I think in any family raising kids is incredibly hard, incredibly hard, and many of your listeners will know that. And the role grandparents can play, then this the role of just love and joy. You know parenting, you can, it's a line in the book, actually, my dad at the end of the book said to me, because I had to knuckle down in the end, that my dad really made me knuckle down. And when the things turned out, spoiler alert, they turned out all right for me.

He said to me, he said, "It's been a pain in the ass being your dad for the past four years, but I'm your father, I'm not your friend." And the two things are very different, and I do think about that a lot. In the modern time, as a parent, you kind of want your kids approval all the time, many of us do, it's very natural. But that having to do the hard things as a parent, the hard decisions, the hard judgments, the ones that don't feel good at the time but you have to take that road. I think the grandparents can fill that love vacuum, and be just unadulterated joy and human wonder.

And that's the way it was for me. I lived across the road from my grandfather, he was my best friend. I'd go over every afternoon, play chess with him, talk to him and my grandmother. And to bring him back to life through the book, I miss him every day, it's been, and to be able to talk about him, to make his memory a blessing, not just for me, but for thousands of people who've enjoyed the book it fills me with joy.

Annie: Yeah, he seemed so lovely. I mean, I loved reading about him, I pictured him, from the pictures you put in there, but it reminded me so much of my own life of, I mean, I moved out of my parents' house when I was 13 to move in with my grandparents for one day. Because I thought, "I can't live here anymore, I have to go where I'm loved."

Roger: Yeah, I mean, that's essentially it. So he loved America too. My great grandfather was, the family myth is, was headed to Chicago and got off the boat leaving Eastern Europe in Liverpool, thinking he was in New York, got off the boat one stop early. So we always thought we were American. And my grandfather, Sam, when things were dark in Liverpool, which they often were, would take off The Statue of Liberty, which he got in one of his many trips, it was just a church key piece of plastic. But to him-

Annie: Is that the one you write about?

Roger: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And he'd take it off, and he had this, and he also had this Empire State Building by his bed, which has a beautifully bent spire, which somehow is very fitting. And he would like, he'd look at it, and he'd say, "Rog, we should've lived there, we should've lived there."

So he didn't just give me love, but he also reinforced that love of America, and much of the reason I'm here in the United States. I'm only sad that he never got to see me, never got to meet his American grandkids, he would have loved them. But again, as I said, to bring his memory back into human conversation, to make him live again, that's the true joy of the book for me.

Annie: How has that happened with I mean, with so many of your friends you talk about in the book, you tell these great stories, like the guy who lives in Chicago. Has writing the book kind of rekindled any of those friendships? I mean, your old girlfriends, I mean, like people you went to school with, did you reconnect with a lot of them in writing this?

Roger: Yeah, a lot of them, a lot of them. It's been again, another part of the journey it's been reconnecting, and the funny part of it is, I sent it to one of the gentlemen that's in the book and he loved it, got right back to me, read it, it's quite a quick read. He read it, I think in two days, and then I got a very long email from him, he's one of my best friends from school.

And he wrote in the email, I was terrified to show it to like a real person, and he wrote, "First of all, I love it, love it, love it, brought back so many memories." All that crap. And then he said, "I've got to tell you, I'm a bit hurt, and a bit upset because I'm not in the book enough." And he said, "I thought I was a better friend, then I'm obviously not, and all my memory." He said it like, "Really heartbreaking." He said, "All my memories of being with you every step of the way, like it doesn't read like that."

And I said to him, "Oh, my Lord, mate, you need to know that like I am not

Winston Churchill, releasing a definitive 12-volume autobiography. This is essentially a highly-edited through line, with a very skillful editor." I said to him, "There's chapters, that are whole chapters about you there that hit the cutting room floor, which I think was very validating." But I thought that was hilarious. I was worried that people would be like, "Oh, you're taking my memories and putting them out there." And instead people were annoyed they weren't in it more.

Annie: Yeah, it's good, oh, I loved it. I want people to read about your schooling experience. I've heard a lot of people interview you about it, and just say it was painful, and really sad. But one of the questions I'd love for you to talk about, if you don't mind is, how has your experience and kind of a bullying experience in school in a lot of ways and a pretty hard-schooling experience, how has that affected your parenting? How does that affect how you're raising your kids?

Roger: It's a great question. So I went to an English private school in 1980s. Where England was still, in those settings, so it was the 1930s, and England still had an empire, children should be seen and not heard. And teachers, mostly old sadistic teachers, who've been there forever teaches Greek, and ancient history, and first world war poems, were able to cane us, for any minor infraction we got hit a lot.

And you'd come home, you'd come home bleeding, and your mum wouldn't be like, "Oh my god, what happened to you?" Instead she'd be like, "Oh, were you a naughty boy, Roger?" And it was, what passed as normal was ridiculous from today's standards. I will say, I mean, this is a podcast that touches upon faith, I think one of the things that happens when you are in a non-sensical, surreal, ridiculous setting, you do fall upon a sense of humor as a life preserver.

And the fact is, the bullying, it was just a way of life for everybody. So I wasn't, I was singled out, and we all developed an incredible, I think, a lot Liverpool's a very funny city. It's known as a place that provides, dozen, overweight of comedians in England, and a lot of it's from suffering and challenge. But the question of how I bring up my own kids, is a lot of how I have tried to parent is by deconstructing the way I was raised.

And to, I mean, there was so much that was good, my mother was just an incredible source of empathy, I mean, a deep, deep, deep source of human empathy. And my dad was a man of, still is a man of many, many passions, and a gentleman that tries to make memories by doing things with people. Which is a wonderful, experiential way to be, so there's I lot I carry-over.

But when you read the book, I think you see in the school setting, there was a lot of how not to, most of I think 90% of the non-parenting parts from my parents, I try to do the exact opposite.

Annie: Yeah, that feels like when I think about, even our peers who are raising kids, so many people got bullied in the '80s and '90s in ways that schools didn't quite know how to protect us from. And so when you carry that into your adult life, you get to choose how that helps you raise the people you're raising.

Roger: I think so. And I think parenting has changed since our upbringing. And I think for your listeners, just the key that was never the key, is just the ability to maintain communication with your kid. To build a relationship where conversation, and being honest and vulnerable are actually strengths as opposed to being perceived as weaknesses is the way to be.

Annie: That's beautiful. Okay, let's talk about Mr. McNally, your teacher that you loved. Oh, Rog, I just was, when I read what you wrote in the back to his wife, that's when I cried. I didn't tear up when you were telling about the teacher, but when you talked about him at the end. Oh, my gosh, I mean, he sounded like the guy from "Dead Poets Society."

Roger: He was an amazing man, he was an amazing. So we had a common room, and it was like a Star Wars cantina of sadists, just awful, awful human beings, who mostly, I realized, had pretty awful upbringings. Many of them actually went to my school themselves. And so we're almost repeating the behaviors that they'd suffered throughout here, to try and heal a trauma that could not be, no matter how many kids you beat that would not heal your trauma.

And then straight Mr. McNally, who was a giant man first of all, just a giant beard-head, human wonder. And he was an Irish guy, who just, a young guy when he began to teach. And he had a completely different mentality, which was informed by a year he'd spent actually in America that he talked about all the time. He spent a year, not quite sure exactly what he did, but he was on the Cape, which he kept referring to. And I did a Boston Public Radio hit the other day, and they loved it. He calls it, he used to call the Cape, the Cod.

Annie: Yeah.

Roger: And he'd walk into class and he'd just, you'd hear his voice outside the room, and he'd go like, "Lads, what do you want to talk about today?" And we'd all shout, "Life, sir, tell us about life." And he would, he'd tell us stories. He be like the three things, three thinking be an individual-

Annie: What was he supposed to be teaching you math, or science?

Roger: Economics.

Annie: Economics, okay.

Roger: And he actually taught us how to game the economics exams, like he taught us there's a system.

Annie: Yeah.

Roger: I'm going to teach you how to succeed, which is not the old way, which was just about to try and torture yourself. Here, "Let's game the system." We all got A's because of him. But, so, he wasn't that worried about the teaching part, he was like, "Guys, we'll get to that, let's talk about life while we're here." And even the kid who just wanted to burn his textbooks, at the back, would sit up and fire away, "Tell us about the Cod Sir, tell us about the Cod."

And he'd tell us the stories about life, and his key message was always, Liverpool was rotting away, Liverpool was filled with hopelessness, unemployment soared, there was a heroin epidemic. And he was just like, "Lads, we are a seafaring people, we look out to sea. We know there's more out there in the world, dream, but don't just dream chase your dreams, act upon them."

And to hear that, to hear these stories about be an individual, work out who you are, and then pursue it, that's all, by the way all that's how we live our life now. But to hear that then, in our context, was I think a ray in one point was this thrilling, it was like sticking your fingers into an electrical socket, it was radical.

And this human being, I mean, here's the amazing thing about it, because we did become a little wild the class did lose their way. The Beastie Boys album, first album came out and mayhem ensued, and he saved my life by filling me with ideas. But ultimately towards the end of the book, after the Beastie Boys themselves had come to town, and started a riot in Liverpool, that ended in police charging us in tear gas.

He picked me up, it's a scene in the book that I won't ruin, but he singled me out to tell me that I was going down a pathway that was not going to end well, for which I'm eternally grateful and he did it by picking me up in a very bubbly way.

Annie: Yeah.

Roger: And I wrote to his wife when he passed away, which he did at a sadly young age, that, "The true greatness of Mr. McNally, was that he knew how to teach us, treat us like men. But he also knew when we needed to be treated like little boys." Which we were and he knew both of those, and that's ultimately why I respect

him, and I'm so grateful to him.

And the piece that you're talking about, about his wife, he was a man who loomed so large, not just for me, but for so bloody many of us. This was a man who taught us to dream, to act, to think, the three radical ideas in our setting. And he passed away, and I wrote her a note, and I regret because it took me a couple of months, it was one of those jobs that I put off and put off. And then I wrote her a letter, so she'd had some time to grieve and move on, I actually took six or seven months, if I'm being honest, which is awful. I wrote her a letter, and she wrote back a beautiful letter. Where I detailed my whole interaction with him, which really forms the core of the book ultimately.

And she wrote back and she said, "Thank you for sending this, it lifts my spirits, because the more time that goes on, the more my greatest fear is that Chris never even existed because his memory will just be forgotten in time. And fills me with incredible happiness, that I hope that this book plays a small role in assuaging that fear for Mrs. McNally.

[00:36:51] <Music>

Annie: Hey friends, just interrupting this conversation one more time to tell you about another amazing partner, Brooklinen. I don't know about where you are, but these days are still hot and sunny around Nashville, and it doesn't really cool down that much at night. Which can mean being too uncomfortable to get any good rest, but enter Brooklinen. Brooklinen was started to create beautiful, high-quality, home essentials that don't cost an arm and a leg, and y'all I'm just going to go ahead and call it a success they have done it.

Brooklinen works directly with manufacturers to make luxury available directly to you, without the luxury level markup. So you get their amazing products but at a reasonable price. Brooklinen has something for every comfort need, ideal for a seasonal refresh because they are launching new products, colors, and patterns all the time. I'm talking super cozy, and cool, and breathable sheets, plush and absorbent towels, cozy robes, y'all know we love an office robe around here, and beautiful loungewear, that you want to put on and never take off.

They are so confident in their core product, y'all, that they come with a 365-day warranty. And their customers are confident to they've given Brooklinen over 75,000, five-star reviews and counting, and their customer service is incredible. I love my Brooklinen sheets so much, they're soft, they keep me cool, and they're the most comfy part of my going to bedtime routine.

So give yourself the comfort refresh you deserve, and get it for less at Brooklinen.

So go to brooklinen.com, and use the promo code THATSOUNDSFUN to get \$20 off with a minimum purchase of \$100. That's brooklinen.com, and enter promo code THATSOUNDSFUN for \$20 off with the minimum purchase of \$100. That's brooklinen.com promo code THATSOUNDSFUN. And now back to finish the conversation.

[00:38:36] <Music>

I taught elementary school, I taught fourth and fifth grade a lot of years ago before I was into this world. And I just thought, "Man, how many of our teachers listening, hope that one kid remembers them the way you remember Mr. McNally."

Roger: How incredible you said that, I have a photograph, and by the way that photograph, I took of him it was like-

Annie: You did?

Roger: Yeah, when you're 16, 17-year-old kid, you want to burn the school down and get the heck away from it, yet which by the way I did, I did. I still dream of buying the school and then just closing it. But I did want to get the heck away from it, I absolutely did, I wanted to get so far away from it. But my Lord, I, just on the way out as I was charging out there he was, and I knew, I knew, I knew, and this is before cellphones, this was when photos were... I mean, what does he look like to you in that photo? How would you describe this human being?

Annie: He looks really burly, you're right. He looks Irish, even though it's not in color, he looks like a burly Irish guy. This is, I probably know too much, because I've read the book, but he looks like he's telling you to break the rules. But like not the rules of school, but the rules that the world told you, you had to follow. He looks like he would tell you to break the world's rules.

Roger: You look in his eyes and there's, even in black and white of an old photo, there's a twinkle, there so much life, there's a mischief, and a human wonder, and I hope all of your listeners' approach life with a mischief and a human wonder.

Annie: Yeah, and guys, I just think how many of our friends listening that are teachers, get to start this school year and go, "Maybe one of these kids, yeah, one of them will remember. I'll do something this year that's mischievous and wonderful, and I will tell those little boys to just quit being little boys and to be men. And they'll remember, they'll remember and write it in a book someday." That's wild. How do you write about your school knowing it still exists, and how terrible they were to students? I mean, how does the school feel about all this?

Roger: I have not asked it.

Annie: Yeah. I always wondered if you'd called anybody? And they're like-

Roger: I mean the school is so different now. Education is so different, and the school is so different, it's a wholly different institution. The funny thing is someone sent me today via Twitter, there's a Wikipedia, apparently there's a page of famous, my school is called Liverpool College and the people who went there are called the Old Lerpoolians. And there's a list on Wikipedia of famous Old Lerpoolians, and I am on it.

Annie: Of course.

Roger: And beneath a man, I can't remember his name, but his name is something like Richard Forrester. So it says Roger Bennett, broadcaster, journalist, America. And then underneath is someone like Richard Forrester, that's not his real name, I'm making that one up, Richard Forrester, murderer.

Annie: Oh no. You are like "I need to be above that guy."

Roger: That's it, I made it, I made it, I'm on that with a murderer. We're very proud of all of our old students.

Annie: That's right. Rog for all of us that are listening that have only been Americans, I lived in Edinburgh, Scotland for a while, but other than that I've only lived in America. And most of us listening have only lived in America, what do you know that we don't know? Tell me about America, give me hope that we don't have as people who've only ever lived here?

Roger: I don't like to speak for all of your listeners, so I can't address that absolutely and completely. But I will say this, and it's really that epilogue of my book is that what I've done, and many of our listeners may know I've done is I've become American. I have put my hand up and said the Oath of Allegiance, I fulfilled the dream I was, I need your listeners to know, I painted the Manhattan skyline on one of my bedroom walls, there is a picture of it in the book, it actually looks more like Warsaw-

Annie: It's awesome.

Roger: ...upon further reflection. But to me, it was Manhattan, The Statue of Liberty was there. I grew up, every night before I go to bed I'd fix the curtain, so the light shone perfectly on Lady Liberty's face, and a dream of going to America. Which I

think is a very common dream, I hear a lot of people dream of being somewhere that they're not, one of the things that's interesting about the book is how many Americans have said to me, "Oh my god, I dreamt about growing up in L.A., and moving to, living in Manchester and being like the Smiths."

I think that, I was like, "Oh, my Lord, you dodged the bullet." But that's hit me that this impulse as a teen and adolescence, to wish yourself to be a different person, living in a different place. Where people laughed at your jokes and thought you were awesome, and you dressed so cool, in a way you couldn't in your real life, I think that's very common. But the thing that is not common is I acted upon it, and I moved to the city that is painted, was painted on my bedroom wall. And then I became that, I became an American, the greatest day of my life July 2018.

And so to answer your question, to stand in that courtroom, to put my hand up to say the oath, with 162 individuals, from 42 different nations. Many of whom, you know I survived a couple of beatings in school and Liverpool tomfoolery darkness. But many of these people that survived civil war, and conflict, and famine and worse, and when you share those stories, the one thing that you tap into is the power of the American idea, is the idea that saved my life.

All of these people in that room at different times in their life, when they were in darkness, when they were challenged, when they were overwhelmed by their reality. The idea of America, is not the reality of America, the reality of America is a different conversation, but the idea of America gave them confidence, gave them hope, gave them belief, gave them courage when they needed it, it did me. And that's why I'd say and I'd tap into that, being in that room, I tap into that optimism, I tap into that human goodness, I tap into that sense of wonder. And that's the spirit that I hope, in which I offer up this book to America.

Annie: It's beautiful, Rog. It's one of the first books I've read by an immigrant, that I had already felt like I was friends with, and so it just was it was a really fun thing to read. So I'm thankful you wrote it.

Roger: Thank you.

Annie: Let's talk one second about Premier League, get everybody ready for the season coming, it's coming.

Roger: Yes, the Premier League, America, it's coming it feels like it's only just-

Annie: It's just-

Roger: ...it must come. I mean it's like oh my Lord, I mean, just the breakneck pace post-COVID of sports, just trying to jam everything in a-

Annie: Right. Are Premier League guys playing in the Olympics right now or no?

Roger: A couple of them yeah.

Annie: Okay.

Roger: I mean, the sports has just become an incessant carousel of human wonder. And if you want to watch a telenovela, is really what the Premier League is, is the greatest telenovela acted out live, but they say it's written without a script.

Annie: Right.

Roger: But don't believe them.

Annie: Men in Blazers, are, the GFOPs like me, we believe they're script writers.

Roger: I'm pretty sure there is a script writer. I mean, what we, what I realized is, in watching the Olympics, watching this, the moments take place before our eyes, watching the Euros this summer. Really, why we watch sports is for the moments of transcendent meaning that actually transcend sports themselves, it's a funny concept. We watch sports for the moments that transcend sports.

And I think even the Premier League, whether it's global culture, whether it's the culture, the identity, challenges, the complexity of modern-day wonder, just the stakes, the money, the global integration of everything, it's just the greatest set of human storylines in every way.

And I watch football to feel things, to feel alive, to feel a sense of great, particularly in lockdown, to watch and feel a sense of human connection, and to make meaning, and to ultimately make collective memories. That's what we do when we watch sports across generations. To me, the Premier League is the greatest single way to do that, and I cannot wait for it to happen, I'm genuinely counting down the days so that it's back in our loving arms.

Annie: Yes. So, and for our friends listening who don't have a Premier League team, what's a fun one to start with? I mean, you and I both have personal answers, but what's an easy one to grab on to?

Roger: Many of your listeners are individuals of faith, and I'd say, well, Everton Football Club is a remarkable starter club, that's a club, that I am third-generation, Everton

fan. And you know faith, and about having your faith tested constantly, but making sure that you choose-

Annie: Perseverance.

Roger: Yes, theologically it is just a wonderful leap into the darkness. A leap of just belief, and passion, and most of all, a club of deep community. You know, I shot a film of Everton Football Club with an incredible human being called Speedo Mick, it's a long story, but this is a character of the club, who goes around freezing clubs all over Britain to watch Everton, and goes only in a speedo. He's a former addict-turned charity figure, who's raised a fortune from opposing fans, as he walks around every stadium in just his speedos.

And as he pointed to me when we made the film, he said, "We're not always very good on the field, but off it where it matters in the terms of the community we build, in terms of the work the club does for the community that surrounds it, in terms of education, caring for the elderly, caring for the sick, and less privileged." He said, "We always win off the field where it matters." And I believe that deeply, there's no more authentic or this is just, you have invited me to do an infomercial for Everton Football Club, Annie Downs.

Annie: I love it.

Roger: But that's it, that's why I love the club so much.

Annie: Okay, Everton, they have become my number two only because of Men in Blazers, I just I do care, I do care. Okay, Rog, is there anything we didn't talk about the you want to make sure we cover today?

Roger: Annie, I am delighted, I feel like we've covered it all. We've gone from being beaten up in school, all the way through to transcendent moments of life, which is why we watch sports, and pretty well everything in between, Annie.

Annie: We did it. Well, I'm very thankful that you're here, and you're welcome back anytime, Rog. Let's do the last question, because the show is called That Sounds Fun, tell me what you do for fun?

Roger: Oh, what do I do for fun? I have four kids, Annie. And they're, just being with them is genuinely the joy of my life. They're all like different human colors to me, colors of the spectrum. And I mean, mostly, I think a lot about life as being very short. I'm very aware that it was in the Euros, the football contest this summer, there was a gentleman in the first game you may have heard of him, Christian Eriksen, a footballer, an elite footballer in the prime of his life, 29-years of age,

who collapsed while playing very early on in the game. And actually had a heart seizure so severe that the medical trainers later said, "We'd lost him, we'd lost them on the field." They brought him back, he is alive and well.

And that moment, it was a moment of horror, that forced us all, who watch sports to escape life, it actually forced us all to confront the truth of life which is life is fragile, life is utterly fragile, life is short, nothing should be taken for granted. You have things and then you don't have things. And I believe deeply and try to make every moment matter, I really do make every moment matter, make memories, consciously make memories, that will last for you and those that you love. And so mostly I really try and focus on that kind of human joy, and the joy that can be experienced through family.

Annie: Yeah, that's beautiful, thank you. Well, I am really, really thankful for you for today, you brought me that kind of joy, what a treat, I'm really appreciative.

Roger: I wish you joy, I wish your city joy, I wish your football club joy. And next time we will meet in-person, and we will rock it to you with great gratitude and courage.

[00:50:31] <Music>

Annie: Oh, you guys, isn't he awesome? I could not think more highly of Rog. I've just been a fan for so long, I love the way he talks about soccer. But as he talked about it in the show, it is just an opportunity to talk about life, and to learn more about what we're feeling, and thinking, and I'm just really thankful for him. If you enjoyed this conversation grab a copy of Rogers book, [\(Re\)born in The USA](#).

Now I'll give you a heads up all this conversation was clearly like good for all of us. His book is probably PG, PG 13, it like talks about teenage life, and so I just want to give you a heads up as you are thinking about getting that book, and it is a really interesting read a beautiful memoir. You also should be listening to [Men in Blazers](#) and watch it, and make sure you follow Rog Bennett, on Twitter, on Instagram, wherever you want to find him, and tell him thanks so much for being on the show, it really meant a ton to me, and I learned a lot in this conversation.

If you need anything else for me, you know, I'm embarrassingly easy to find Annie F. Downs on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), all the places you may need me that's how you can find me. And I think that's it from me today, friends go out or stay home, and do something that sounds fun to you, I'll do the same. Have a great couple of days and we'll see you back here on Friday, with my friends from Cross Point Music, Mike Grayson and Cheryl Stark. We'll see y'all then.

Episode 309: Roger Bennett

That Sounds Fun Podcast with Annie F. Downs

[00:51:50] <Music>